



# **DE-ESCALATION AND WAR TERMINATION IN MULTI-DOMAIN REGIONAL WARS**

**Annotated Bibliography**

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**Center for Global Security Research**  
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# DE-ESCALATION AND WAR TERMINATION IN MULTI-DOMAIN REGIONAL WARS

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Prepared By: Brian Radzinsky, Harrison Durland,  
Camille Freestone and Spencer Erjavic

### Key Questions:

- What are the particular challenges of successfully de-escalating and terminating modern multi-domain regional wars against nuclear-armed adversaries?
- What are the meaningful distinctions between de-escalation and war termination?
- What concepts have been developed to meet these challenges?
- Are there gaps in our thinking? What concepts can help to fill those gaps?
- What more can and should be done to address the negative findings of the US National Defense Strategy Commission in its 2018 report?

### Panel Topics:

- Panel 1: Framing the Issue
  - Panel 2: Understanding the Emerging Blue Theory of Victory
  - Panel 3: Anticipating Red's De-Escalation Calculus
  - Panel 4: Anticipating the Interests of Allies
  - Panel 5: Defining Victory
  - Panel 6: Getting to Victory
- (No suggested readings are included on this topic.)*

## Panel 1: Framing the Issue

- What were the findings of the NDS commission bearing on this topic?
- What interim work has been done?
- What can the 2021 DoD policy and posture reviews contribute to advancing thinking?

Eric Edelman, Gary Roughead, et al. *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*. (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf>.

Reviewing the 2017 National Defense Strategy, the commission came to the simple but stark conclusion that the United States “could lose” a regional war. It determined that the U.S. lacks a detailed understanding of the escalation dynamics that could arise in a conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary and of concepts to counter adversary escalation without generating an overwhelming nuclear response. The Commission recommended that the Defense Department conduct a detailed study of such dynamics with an aim to informing operational concepts that could facilitate de-escalation as well as posture decisions that would enable prompt escalation control in key theaters.

Brad Roberts, “Rethinking How Wars Must End: NBC War Termination Issues in the Post-Cold War Era,” Chapter 9 in *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order*, ed. Victor A. Utgoff (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000) (available electronically by request from Katie Thomas at [Thomas94@llnl.gov](mailto:Thomas94@llnl.gov))

This chapter from 2000 examines the war termination topic in the context of those times: so-called “major theater wars” against “WMD-armed rogue states.” Roberts argues that wars have both outcomes and consequences and that successful war termination requires achieving both favorable outcomes and favorable consequences. The latter would be highly salient in such wars, given the role of the United States as a leading nuclear power and security guarantor. The first use of WMD in interstate wars would be a defining event, especially if it were to invoke questions about a possible US nuclear reply. The United States might face a choice between actions that cast it as a nuclear bully or a wimp in the face of nuclear aggression but would want to choose a course of action casting it as a responsible steward of collective interests.

## Panel 2: Understanding the Emerging Blue Theory of Victory

- How does US nuclear strategy envision restoring deterrence after it has failed?
- How does US strategy for multi-domain deterrence envision successfully influencing the adversary’s deterrence calculus?
- What are the different contributions of military and political means?

Thomas P. Ehrhard, "Treating the Pathologies of Victory: Hardening the Nation for Strategic Competition," *2020 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2019): 19, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/topical-essays/treating-the-pathologies-victory-hardening-the-nation-strategic>.

In this piece, Thomas Erhard argues that following the conclusion of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States fell victim to a "pathology of victory." Specifically, he argues four key pathologies have weakened American competitive advantage: post-Cold War triumphalism that corroded warfighting capabilities; strategic distraction following the 9/11 attacks, which created a blind spot for China's rise and Russia's reemergence; diminished analytical prowess that favored superficial study of all adversaries over sophisticated study of key adversaries; and wishful thinking that stunted strategic reform as great power competition reemerged. Erhard argues that U.S. nuclear and military strategy was not immune to these pathologies. While the United States was focused on irregular conflicts in the Middle East and Western Asia, Russia and China modernized their strategic forces and studied the American way of war.

Michael Fitzsimmons, "The False Allure of Escalation Dominance," *War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/false-allure-escalation-dominance/>

The United States faces a growing risk of escalation to nuclear war in limited regional conflicts. Fitzsimmons argues that this is due to two key risk factors: erosion of U.S. conventional superiority and the emergence of a perceived asymmetry of interests (and therefore resolve) between the U.S. and potential adversaries. In such an environment, a strategy of escalation dominance is appealing, as comprehensive superiority seems a highly effective deterrent. Fitzsimmons warns, however, that the escalation dominance concept, as traditionally framed by its advocates, has flaws that make it strategically untenable for the U.S. For instance, escalation dominance requires both sides to recognize that the dominant side enjoys an advantage at each rung of the escalation ladder. Yet the increasingly contested conventional balance of power along with the uncertainties created by multi-domain warfare make this requirement hard to meet. Instead, American defense policy should pursue discriminate escalation *advantages* which allow U.S. leaders to manage escalation favorably while definitively avoiding a declaratory policy of dominance.

James Hasik, "Beyond the Third Offset: Matching Plans for Innovation to a Theory of Victory," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 91, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter (2018): 14–21, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-91/jfq-91\\_14-21\\_Hasik.pdf](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-91/jfq-91_14-21_Hasik.pdf)

The Third Offset was a technological and conceptual initiative pursued by the Defense Department from roughly 2014 to 2018. Its aim was to leverage game-changing technologies like artificial intelligence to restore U.S. military advantage against great and regional power competitors. After providing a brief history of the circumstances, innovations, and ideas that led to the emergence of the first and second offset strategies (the nuclear and precision strike revolutions, respectively), Hasik assesses the strategic promise of the Third Offset initiative. He suggests that for this new technological push to truly have strategic offset value, the U.S. needs to double down on technology areas

where it has "excelled," particularly if those are areas in which China lags. Picking the correct investment areas is critical. Technologies with widespread market use, for instance, could create the conditions for adversaries to capitalize from similar technologies and overturn U.S. competitive advantage. As an alternative to technology-laden offset, Hasik proposes a competitive military strategy that turns the U.S.' geographic challenge of projecting power across wide distances.

Brad Roberts, *On Theories of Victory: Red and Blue*. Livermore Papers on Global Security No. 7. (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2020), <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR-LivermorePaper7.pdf>.

Following on the 2018 findings of the National Defense Strategy Commission, Roberts sets out key concepts for countering the escalation strategies of powerful nuclear-armed adversaries. Central to his approach is understanding the adversary's "theory of victory" (that is, the ideas that tie together ends, ways, and means) and "escalation calculus" (of benefits, costs, and risks of different courses of action). To strip away the confidence of enemy leaders in their theory of victory and tip their escalation calculus in favor of de-escalation, the United States needs its own theory of victory, one based on coercion rather than "escalation control" or "strategic dominance."

### **Panel 3: Anticipating Red's De-escalation Calculus**

- Is it possible to conceive of a "culminating point" or points at which adversary leaders choose not to continue to pay the costs and tolerate the risks of continued war?
- In an escalating conflict, how might Moscow and Beijing calculate the benefits, costs, and risks of taking "off-ramps" offered by Washington?
- Is it possible to conceive of blocking their "up-ramps" by creating dilemmas for them?
- What role might a threat to regime survival play?

Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021): 3–35, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070>

Ven Bruusgaard argues that, in order to better understand countries' nuclear strategies, it is important to look beyond nuclear forces and consider the conventional context. In the case of Russia, that means understanding the weakness of Russian conventional forces after the Cold War and the resultant sense of insecurity among Russian leaders. Noting that Russian conventional inferiority in the 1990s led to greater emphasis on nuclear deterrence, she argues that the growing strength of Russian conventional forces in the early 2000s allowed it to raise its threshold for nuclear use. The author concludes that the conventional-nuclear relationship is not necessarily static or deterministic, but rather, as Russia's modernization of its conventional forces illustrates, that the relationship can shift over time. As such, Ven Bruusgaard suggests that the role of nuclear weapons in Russian strategy today is restricted to deterring nuclear attacks, forestalling major conventional defeats, and deterring threats to regime security.

Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security*, 44, No. 2 (2019): 61–109, [http://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00359](http://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00359).

Cunningham and Fravel examine the origins and implications of Chinese thinking regarding conventional and nuclear escalation, particularly as it relates to U.S. thinking on the same topics. The authors find that China is skeptical of the possibility of controlling escalation after the nuclear threshold has been crossed, yet China is relatively confident in the possibility of controlling conventional conflict escalation. The authors also find that this directly contrasts with US perceptions, which they describe as more pessimistic below the nuclear threshold but less pessimistic above the nuclear threshold (in comparison to Chinese views). In the words of the authors, this difference in views "could create pressure for a U.S.-China conflict to escalate rapidly into an unlimited nuclear war." Chinese thinking is unlikely to shift on these core questions, but the authors list some of the factors that could drive shifts in these views, such as an increase in the PLA Rocket Force's influence on nuclear strategy.

Michael Kofman, Anya Fink and Jeffrey Edmonds. *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*. (Center for Naval Analyses, 2020), [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf).

The authors document Russian thinking on strategic deterrence, which is a holistic concept for shaping adversary decision making by integrating military and non-military measures. Russian strategic culture emphasizes cost imposition over denial for deterrence purposes, believing in forms of calibrated damage as a vehicle by which to manage escalation. One of the objectives of strategic deterrence operations and cost-imposition is de-escalation. However, the authors argue that de-escalation should be understood as containing escalation, or escalation management, but not necessarily war termination. De-escalation, for instance, may entail limiting combat operations to an acceptable threshold of conflict. De-escalation is also not to be construed as necessarily winning; an operational pause resulting in negotiations can be considered de-escalation. The authors conclude that while Russian concepts of strategic deterrence aim to encompass an implicit theory of war termination, thinking on war termination as such is nascent in both Moscow and other nuclear-armed capitals.

Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "Preventing Escalation During Conventional Wars," (Monterey, CA: U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, 2015), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36740681.pdf>

Lieber and Press emphasize the importance of leadership/regime interests as a factor in escalation dynamics, including how the risks of a coup that ends with the execution of an authoritarian leader may outweigh the leader's concerns over the risk of nuclear escalation. According to the authors, such incentive structures when combined with a state's clear inability to fight the U.S. through conventional conflict can make nuclear escalation a reasonable gamble for desperate leaders, which can further bolster the credibility of their nuclear threats. The authors suggest that these threats can be exacerbated by an emphasis on eliminating an enemy's command and control as well as

their strategic assets, which can contribute to a “use it or lose it” mentality. In the final section of the article, the authors discuss a variety of ways to mitigate escalation risks, such as preparing communication strategies and conducting tabletop exercises.

#### Panel 4: Anticipating the Interests of Allies

- What interests would guide their approach to de-escalation and war termination?
- Where might those interests converge and diverge from those of the US?

Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

Ikle observes that in ending a war, there are likely to be internal disagreements between military and civilian leaders over whether and how to seek an end to fighting. These disagreements can arise over whether to negotiate while fighting, what kind of a resolution to seek, and whether the timing is right for an end to the war. Similar disagreements can arise among allies.

William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Stueck documents in detail the emergence of the armistice agreement for the Korean War and the tensions that arose between the U.S. and South Korean governments over the question of whether to seek a divided Korean peninsula or pursue unification under South Korean control. South Korean leader Syngman Rhee recognized that he lacked leverage over the U.S. willingness to continue to the fight, but he nonetheless attempted to convey his dissatisfaction by engaging in actions that complicated the negotiations, such as unilaterally releasing Communist prisoners who refused to return to the North. Stueck also explores the challenges of maintaining the domestic coalition in support of the president’s strategy as well as international support at the United Nations and elsewhere.

#### Panel 5: Defining Victory

- What would winning mean, politically and operationally?
- If it is not possible to achieve preferred political objectives, what outcomes might still be considered a success for the US and its allies?
- What would victory mean and require? Would there be a meaningful distinction between the requirements of winning the war and winning the peace to follow?

Cian O’Driscoll, *Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Just War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

O’Driscoll puts a renewed focus on the concept of victory in just war theory, which traditionally has focused on the ethics of whether to use force (*jus ad bellum*) and how



force is used (*jus in bello*). O'Driscoll begins by observing that while peace is the natural objective of a just war, there is a tension between peace and victory. "For a just war to advance the aim of peace it must be presumably consummated in victory. Yet, so far as victory glorifies the idea of prevailing over one's enemies in combat, and encourages people to view war, not in terms of its relation to justice, order and peace, but in a more reductive zero-sum logic," victory appears to challenge rather than advance the aim of peace. Victory and peace are somewhat paradoxical: victory is presumably necessary for peace, but "the act of winning a just war is likely to undermine the peace that the just war is being fought to advance." In addition, while victory is associated with the idea of a decisive battle, most wars are those in which neither side wins decisively, such as irregular conflicts or limited wars. However, the author does not dismiss the idea of a victory in just war either. Rather, he argues that victories in just wars should be framed in terms of the objectives that just wars are meant to secure.

Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a401465.pdf>

Gray explores the idea of decisive victory in U.S. military thought. During the Cold War decisive victory was all but ignored when confronted with the threat of nuclear holocaust from the Soviet Union. However, after 1991, and particularly after 9/11, decisive victory roared backed to life. Gray warns that the complexities of war call for a more robust understanding of victory, one in which the "Big Idea," decisive victory, is replaced by a mix of strategic success and strategic advantage—accomplishments that fall notably short of the forcible disarmament of the enemy. Decisive victory is possible and important, but it is never guaranteed, not even by military-technological excellence. Finally, Gray argues that U.S. interest in decisive victory is isolating, as American allies are still haunted by the cost of both world wars. It may also be self-defeating, as the U.S. faces new threats with unique problems which decisive victory cannot solve on its own.

William C. Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

William Martel looks at the evolution of the theory and practice of victory in U.S. politics. Through a series of case studies, Martel applies a framework to consider how different categories of military force relate to victory in an effort to address four central questions about victory: Why is it important to have a coherent definition of victory? Who should determine how victory is defined? What are the possible consequences of the failure to define the conditions that govern victory? What is the relationship between the concept of victory and the responsibilities assumed by the state for post-conflict reconstruction? Policy makers, he argues, must clearly define what victory means, what sectors of the state must be mobilized to achieve this, and what the post-conflict commitments to victory will entail. The author concludes that because victory is inherently subjective, policy makers must develop precise language for a deliberate and systematic theoretical narrative to push back against such subjective tendencies.





Center for Global Security Research  
Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory  
P.O. Box 808, L-189 Livermore, California 94551  
<https://CGSR.llnl.gov>

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